Social and Emotional Development in the Primary Program

Guest Author, Dr. Lilian G. Katz

The development of children's emotional and social competence—both well underway since birth-deserve central concern throughout the primary years. These two aspects of development are closely linked to each other. A number of studies have shown for example that understanding and empathizing with others' feelings and being socially competent go hand in hand. In fact, they are so intertwined that it is difficult to discern which of them comes first (Saarni, et al. 1998).

Widely-Held Expectations

As shown in the Widely-Held Expectations, Section V, a broad range of widely-held expectations for emotional and social development during the preschool and primary years is listed. Many of them are included in the concept self-esteem as well.

Good experiences in the primary grades can make a substantial positive contribution to the realization of these expectations. Although neither emotional nor social competencies are learned from formal instruction or exhortation, teachers can help children with both aspects of development in a variety of ways. Similarly, optimal self-esteem is not acquired through instruction; but teachers and many of the experiences they provide (as well as prevent) can make a major contribution to its development.

The Development of Emotional Competence

The development of emotional competence is a highly complex process. Though difficult to define, specialists generally define it as consisting of awareness of one's own and others' feelings, the capacity to empathize with others' emotional states, to distinguish between inner feelings and outward expression of them, and awareness of the place of emotions in relationships (Saarni, 1999). It includes also gradual mastery over one's feelings so that they are strong enough to provoke action and interaction, but not so strong as to be overwhelming to the child or to be so intense as to provoke wariness among peers. A growing body of research indicates that 'emotion regulation,' commonly referred to as 'impulse control,' is one of the most critical developmental accomplishments of the first five or six years of life (Gross, 1998).

Children usually experience positive emotions when they are comfortable among their peers. Negative emotions are likely to reduce their chances of building close relationships with them. Furthermore, studies indicate that positive emotions contribute substantially to a child's openness to all the kinds of learning that matter during the early primary years (Frederickson, 1998).

The Development of Social Competence

Evidence has been accumulating for several decades to indicate that children who cannot find a good place for themselves in their peer group are significantly more likely than their more socially competent peers to experience difficulties with their academic work and to drop out of school (Ladd, et al. 1999). Indeed, W. W. Hartup asserts that peer relationships contribute a great deal to both social and cognitive development stating that:

> Indeed, the single best childhood predictor of adult adaptation is *not* IQ, *not* school grades, and *not* classroom behavior but, rather the adequacy with which the child gets along with other children. Children who are generally disliked, who are aggressive and disruptive, who are unable to sustain close relationships with other children, and who cannot establish a place for themselves in the peer culture are seriously "at risk" (Hartup, 1992).

In addition to difficulties in school, the risks include later problems with employment, parenting, and other important aspects of adult life.

Like the development of emotional competence, the achievement of social competence is also a complex aspect of human behavior. Social competence is usually defined as the capacity to initiate and maintain satisfying relationships with peers, as well as to be able to form friendships with some of them (Katz & McClellan, 1997). According to Hartup (1992), the "essentials of friendship are reciprocity and commitment between individuals who see themselves more or less as equals" (p. 2).

The components of social competence include knowledge, skills, dispositions, and of course, feelings (Katz, 1995). *Social knowledge* refers to the children's understanding and conceptualizations of such things as others' points of view, interests, desires, motives, preferences, and so forth. *Social skills* include such interpersonal strategies as how to approach others, to initiate interaction with others, how to take turns, to handle disagreements, resolve conflicts, express one's preferences, articulate one's wishes, and many others. Positive *social dispositions* include the dispositions to be open, receptive and accepting of others, to seek companionship, to be generous, cooperative, humorous, patient, and so forth. Many *feelings* or emotions that are part of emotional competence are involved in social competence. For example, the capacity to feel empathy, to take pleasure in companionship, to feel affection toward others and to care about them, are essential aspects of the give and take of social interaction throughout life.

The Teacher's Role in Emotional And Social Development.

Teachers can play a significant role in fostering children's emotional and social growth. For many children they are powerful models of human competencies. The teacher also provides contexts which can maximize the expression of positive behavior and feelings, and can minimize those experiences that may interfere with healthy emotional and social growth and self-esteem.

Teachers as Models.

Teachers can provide very significant, visible, and observable models of emotionally and socially competent behavior. Children learn as much about what is expected and desired by adults by watching how they interact with others as they do from their own direct interactions with their teachers.

A teacher's respect for all the members of her class, her openness to and acceptance of the diversity of races, cultures, personalities, preferences and opinions in the group, and her sensitivity to their feelings and wishes are all readily observed by the children in the class. Respecting and accepting all the ways in which a group of young children may vary does not mean being indulgent or intimidated by the children's wishes and demands. Rather, it means that the teacher acknowledges that there are many different points of view and at the same time expresses her own views concerning what behavior is valued and expected both respectfully and firmly.

Providing Contexts for Positive Emotional and Social Experiences

Teachers can contribute to social and emotional development by providing contexts in which children have ample opportunity to experience positive emotions and to learn to manage negative ones. Frederickson (1998) suggests that positive emotions are best thought of as "families of feelings" that vary in intensity. These would include joy, contentment, interest, satisfaction, relief, and various kinds of caring, love or pleasure in the company of certain others. Frederickson further argues that such experiences "build intellectual resources," whereas negative emotions are likely to block intellectual learning (1998, p. 310).

The class as a community of learners. A community is a group of individuals who feel and believe they have a stake in each other's well being and who accomplish by working together what they could not do alone. A primary classroom is experienced as a community when the children have ample opportunity to experience the kinds of satisfaction and pleasure that come from working for common goals. These experiences could include solving problems together, creating a range of products related to their learning, overcoming obstacles in the course of this work, as for example when children cooperate in projects involving investigations of worthwhile topics and purposes (Katz & Chard, 2000).

Teachers can also help strengthen the sense of community by encouraging children to offer each other suggestions and advice, to express their appreciation of each others' efforts, and by helping children to interpret their classmates' wishes and ideas accurately. For example, in the course of working on projects in small sub-groups within a class the teacher encourages children to prize and capitalize on the differences in experiences, interests and aptitudes within the group so that they see themselves as enriched by their differences. Furthermore, as sub-groups of children work on various aspects of an investigation they can learn how to argue, to defend their position in a disagreement, and to try out strategies by which to resolve them.

During the primary years children's emotional and social growth are also enhanced by providing appropriate opportunities to discuss and develop agreements on what ground rules they want their class to observe. Periodic evaluations of their appropriateness and effectiveness can strengthen their sensitivity to the complexities of group life and to the benefits of constructive discussion of them.

Protecting the Rights and Needs of Each Individual in the Class

Occasionally one or two children in a class behave in ways that undermine the well-being of others. Children who behave in this way are often called bullies or referred to as bossy. In both cases the teacher has a significant role to play in helping both the aggressors and the aggrieved to deal with the problems these patterns of behavior can cause.

First, the teacher makes it clear in a firm and matter-of-fact way that he/she does not approve of the behavior. Second, she or he indicates to the victims how they can respond with firmness and dignity to the occasions of victimization. It is well-documented in research that bullies—and bosses—are very selective about their victims; they don't pick totally passive children, but rather they choose children who show clear distress and frustration during the bullying incidents. The teacher can indicate to the victims the tone of voice and phrasing to use when resisting the aggressor that reflects confidence as well as gracefulness. Thirdly, the teacher takes every possible opportunity to develop a relationship with the aggressors *about other aspects of their work and class participation* that have no relationship to their undesirable behavior. In this way such children are less likely to invest their whole identity in the peer group on their negative behavior.

Studies of self-attribution processes in children indicate that many children prefer to have a negative reputation in their peer group than no identity at all. Teachers help a great deal when they use real opportunities for such children to try out other roles within the peer group.

Recent research indicates that 'relational aggression' more often observed in girls than boys can also undermine the emotional and social well-being of the class. "Relational aggression includes attempts

to exclude peers from group participation, besmirch another's reputation, and gossip about another's negative attributes" (Coie & Dodge, 1998, p. 791). When a teacher suspects that such relational aggression is occurring she can help by making it clear in a firm and matter-of-fact way that she disapproves of the behavior, by teaching the victims how to respond gracefully and confidently in such incidents, and by forming a relationship with the perpetrator centered on completely different aspects of their participation in the life of the class.

On the basis of the accumulated evidence now available, there is good reason to believe that young children who do not overcome social difficulties by the end of the early primary years experience many difficulties later. They are significantly more likely to have difficulties with achievement, to drop out of school, to find satisfactory employment, and to develop their own family relationships later in their lives. There is also evidence to suggest that children who do not overcome early rejection by their peers eventually find each other and they gain feelings of solidarity, loyalty, and belonging they missed in the early years based on their shared hostility and rejection of the rest of society. Thus, failure to help such children can have very long-term consequences for the children-as well as for the rest of society.

The Development of Self-Esteem

The development of self-esteem has long been of concern to primary school educators. Self-esteem is linked to both emotional and social competence. Though it is difficult to define, most specialists agree that self-esteem refers to the way individuals appraise themselves or 'estimate' themselves on a set of criteria that are learned very early at home and are also deeply embedded in their cultures.

The concepts of self and self-esteem vary among cultures in terms of the personal attributes that serve as criteria against which to appraise oneself. Western cultures tend to count such personal qualities as independence and self-reliance as important criteria against which to evaluate the self. However, many Asian and other non-Western cultures' criteria for self-appraisal include self-restraint, modesty, and connectedness with others.

As children grow beyond the preschool years and spend increasing proportions of time outside of the family context, the larger society imposes criteria upon which self-appraisal is based. With increasing age, however, children begin to internalize the criteria of self-worth they pick up in environments outside of the family, and a sense of the standards to be attained on the criteria from the larger community they observe and in which they are beginning to participate.

The Cyclic Nature of Self-Esteem

Optimal self-esteem is associated with such feelings as cheerfulness, optimism, and relatively high energy. High self-esteem is associated with high energy, which increases effectiveness and competence, which in turn strengthen feelings of self-esteem and self-worth. Low self-esteem is typically accompanied by feelings of doubt about one's worth and acceptability, and with feeling forlorn, morose, or even sad. Such feelings may be accompanied by relatively low energy and weak motivation, invariably resulting in low effort. The low effort gives rise to increasing doubts about one's ability and acceptability in a way that further inhibits effort and accomplishment. In this way,

feelings about oneself constitute a *recursive cycle* such that the feelings arising from self-appraisal tend to produce behavior that strengthens those feelings-both positive or negative.

The cyclic nature of self-esteem is similar to Bandura's (1989) conception of *self-efficacy,* namely, processes by which perceptions of one's own capacities and effective action "affect each other bi-directionally" (p. 1176). In other words, effective action makes it possible to see oneself as competent, which in turn leads to effective action, and so forth. The same cycle applies to self-perceptions of incompetence. However, Bandura (1989) warns that

> A sense of personal efficacy [does] not arise simply from the incantation of capability. Saying something should not be confused with believing it to be so. Simply saying that one is capable is not necessarily self-convincing, especially when it contradicts preexisting firm beliefs. No amount of reiteration that I can fly will persuade me that I have the efficacy to get myself airborne and to propel myself through the air (p. 1179).

This formulation of the dynamics of feelings about the self confirms the view that self-esteem merits the concern of educators as well as parents. Nevertheless, it also casts some doubt on the frequent assertion that, if children are somehow made to "feel good about themselves," success in school will follow. In other words, just because young children need to "feel good about themselves," telling them that they are special (e.g., because they can color) or that they are unique, and providing them with other similar flattery may not cause them to believe they are so; nor is such empty flattery likely to engender good feelings about oneself (Katz, 1995).

Dunn's (1988) view of the nature of self-esteem is that it is related to the extent to which one sees oneself as the cause of effects. She asserts that "the sense of cause [is] a crucial feature of the sense-of self" and the essence of self-confidence is the feeling of having an effect on things and being able to cause or at least affect events and others. On the other hand, feeling loved by the significant others in one's environment involves feeling and knowing that one's behavior and status really matter to them—matter enough to cause them to have real emotion and to provoke action and reaction from them, including anger and stress as well as pride and joy. Thus when a teacher speaks firmly to a child about how his work might be improved the child is often getting a message of the teacher's caring about the child and his or her progress.

When academic achievement, symbolized by grades, becomes a major criterion of self-esteem, then one's own self-esteem can be boosted by finding others with whom to compare oneself favorably. That is to say, children can develop a vested interest in finding individual classmates or groups to look down on. If, for example, parents and schools convey to children that their self-esteem is

related to academic achievement as indicated by grades and test scores, then a significant proportion of children must have low self-esteem-at least on that criterion. In such a school culture the development of cooperation and inter—group solidarity becomes very problematic.

An adaptive response of children at the low end of the distribution of academic achievement might be to distance themselves from the school culture. Such children may strive to meet other criteria of self-esteem, such as the criteria of various peer groups, that may or may not enhance participation in the larger society. This suggests that schools and classes are most likely to help by balancing the curriculum so that sufficient contexts are provided in which all participants can contribute to group efforts, albeit in individual ways. A substantial body of research indicates that cooperative learning strategies and cooperative goals are effective ways to address these issues (see Ames, 1992). The work accomplished in these group contexts should be held to the same high standards that apply to all their other work in the class.

In sum, if children learn to base their self-appraisals on favorable comparisons of themselves with others, then the identification of inferior others-whether individuals or groups-may become endemic in a society**.** When the two tendencies-to base self-esteem on characteristics that are present at birth and to elevate one's self-appraisal by identifying others who are inferior on any given criterion-occur together in a society, conditions develop which are likely to support prejudice and oppression.

The most important way in which teachers support children's self-esteem is to esteem them. That means giving children opportunities to take initiative, to make some choices and decisions, and to express their views in a respectful and accepting environment. Self-esteem is also strengthened when praise is used seriously and genuinely, which is only possible when it is used sparingly.

Conclusion

Since almost all important learning occurs in the company of others setting the stage in support of children's emotional and social development is as much a part of the teacher's role as is the curriculum itself. Nevertheless, it is a good idea to keep in mind that some of the social and emotional difficulties experienced by children cannot be addressed by a teacher within the classroom and may need the assistance of specialists.

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